

Legal Avenues: Your Road to Solutions

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Innovative Mentorship Series (Part 2): Cultivating Diversity through Sponsorship

Law firms are increasingly realizing that attracting and investing in a diverse staff is about more than improving statistics—it's about improving the bottom line and gaining a competitive edge in the marketplace. Skilled associates and partners from a variety of social, racial, and ethnic backgrounds can bring unique perspectives to cases and internal decision making, improve client relations, and positively contribute to a firm's culture. But developing and retaining female and other minority attorneys is often easier said than done. One way that firms can prime their diverse associates for longevity and leadership is through sponsorship.¹

The second in a two-part series on creative mentorship solutions, this article will explore sponsorship as a way to maximize the benefits of a diverse workplace, improve minority retention, and expand advancement opportunities within firms.

What's the Difference?

According to Betsy Myers, founding director of the Center for Women and Business at Bentley University, sponsorship is “mentorship on steroids.”² In other words, while sponsorship entails many of the same objectives as traditional mentorship (like evaluating performance, providing career advice, and fostering an environment of collaboration), a sponsor plays a much more active role in helping individuals (particularly minorities) reach their full potential and succeed in their career goals. In this way, sponsorship is akin to apprenticeship: whereby a seasoned partner takes a promising associate under their wing with the intention of guiding them on the path to success and recognition within the upper echelons of the firm.³

However, sponsorship should not be mistaken for an unfair advantage engineered to benefit only a favored few. In fact, its primary purpose is to combat what one UC Berkeley School of Law researcher has identified as normal

cognitive categorization that leads to unintentional discrimination and exclusion within groups—or “unconscious bias.”⁴ This reality is what often drives many capable minority associates to leave their firms. Despite matching or even exceeding the work of their peers, they continually fall through the cracks and are overlooked for key promotions, which can lead to feelings of alienation.⁵

Sponsorship is critical when it comes to engaging and maintaining top talent. It gives firms the opportunity to personally groom individuals into loyal, productive assets and provides young attorneys with the knowledge and initiative they need to get ahead and earn the recognition they seek.⁶

Formal vs. Informal Implementation

Like traditional mentor/mentee relationships, sponsor/protégé relationships can happen spontaneously without any prompting, but developing a formal program or sponsorship protocol is recommended to ensure that maximum effectiveness is achieved and clear guidelines and expectations are set.⁷

In order for any sponsorship effort to succeed, developing talent must be established as a top priority.⁸ Sponsors must be committed to taking time out to encourage their protégés, understand their goals, promote their visibility, network on their behalf, and provide professional instruction and feedback. Without firm-wide support for these endeavors, motivation to begin a sponsorship program can evaporate quickly.⁹

Determining criteria for how protégés will be selected for participation in the program and subsequently paired with a sponsor is also crucial in the early planning stages. For example, will only minority candidates be eligible? Or only associates with a certain degree of seniority? Will sponsors choose their own protégés or will they be assigned? Ironing out these sensitive details can help circumvent any conflicts regarding transparency that may arise.¹⁰

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Footnotes

¹Marchman, Judy L. “Retaining and Mentoring Women and Minority Lawyers” *Texas Bar Journal*. 71 (2008): 310.

²“Sponsorship Matters: Creating Effective Programs to Advance Women” *Bentley University Center for Women & Business*. Accessed 10 Feb. 2015. Available at: <http://www.bentley.edu/centers/center-for-women-and-business/sponsorship-matters>

³Imno, Kenneth O.C. “Mentors Are Good, Sponsors Are Better” *Law Practice*. Jan/Feb. 2013. Accessed 10 Feb. 2015. Available at: http://www.americanbar.org/publications/law_practice_magazine/2013/january-february/mentors-are-good-sponsors-are-better.html

⁴Ibid.

⁵Woodward, Nancy Hatch. “Sponsorships Make the Difference, Especially for Women” *Employment Alert*. 29 (26 Jan. 2012): 3.

⁶Marchman.

⁷Young, Shane Jasmine. “The Need for Diversity Champions and Sponsorship Programs in the Legal Profession” *Nevada Lawyer*. 20 (May 2012): 17.

⁸Woodward.

⁹Imno.

¹⁰Abbott, Ida. “Should Your Firm Start a Sponsorship Program?” *Management Solutions* 36 (Spring 2013). Accessed 10 Feb. 2015: <http://www.idaabbott.com/publications/newsletter/issue-36>